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SUBJECT: PATRIOTIC EDUCATION FOR IMAMS IN XINJIANG

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1C. STATE 74399

Classified By: Classified by Acting Political Internal Unit Chief
Susan Thornton. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

Summary

11. (C) Local authorities in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region in China's far northwest are stepping up efforts to cultivate "patriotic" religious personnel through a second round of intensive training, according to local officials. Following an initial round of patriotic training from 2001-2005, the current round includes classes on law, science, Chinese language, Xinjiang's "achievements" and the "proper" interpretation of the Koran. Stressing the close relations between the Government and religious figures in Xinjiang, officials noted that many religious leaders enjoy government stipends and occupy various official posts. Foreign Muslim communities have not provided financial assistance to Uighur communities nor produced the same factionalism among the Uighurs that exists between the Arabian-influenced Hui Muslims in China. End Summary.

Xinjiang Focuses on Patriotic Training

12. (C) Xinjiang has launched another round of patriotic training aimed at cultivating current and future local religious leaders, Xinjiang Religious and Ethnic Affairs Commission Deputy Director Ma Jin told poloffs during a late May visit to the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR). During the first round of training from 2001-2005, 9,780 training sessions were held for patriotic religious personnel from southwest Xinjiang's Khotan Prefecture alone as part of the Government's "effort to protect religious freedom while safeguarding national unity and reform," according to Khotan Ethnic and Religious Affairs Commission Deputy Director Metnaz Moussa. The current education campaign, which will run until 2008, aims to train all of the XUAR's approximately 27,000 religious personnel, Ma stated.

13. (C) Ma claimed that the training is not aimed at fostering patriotism, but rather at "cultivating" religious leaders who are "already patriotic." He stated that the courses give religious leaders a

better understanding of Xinjiang's history, the Government's "achievements" and the support the XUAR has received from Beijing over the past 50 years. In addition to these topics, the training offers instruction in Chinese language, law and science. Classes are being conducted in a range of institutions, including at the Urumqi-based Xinjiang Islamic Theological Seminary, at the XUAR's four Islamic Institutes and smaller-scale "classes" in mosques and imam's homes. The duration of the training varies, depending on the needs of the local Muslim community, Ma said.

¶14. (C) Training of Khotan prefecture's 4,997 registered religious practitioners, who service 4,330 mosques, has helped increase their religious, legal, scientific and technical knowledge, stated Metnaz. The curriculum, designed by the local Islamic Association under the leadership of the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Commission and United Front Work Department (UFWD), has helped imams understand the Koran "properly," he remarked. The training also helps religious leaders to better understand and explain the officially sanctioned "wo er ci" or "Koranic Teachings," devised to avoid varying interpretations of the Koran that might lead to divisions within China's Islamic community (see Ref A).

Imams As Politicians

¶15. (C) The local government encourages religious

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practitioners to simultaneously pursue a secular occupation, Metnaz stated, noting that 2,323 of Khotan's religious leaders work in some sort of business. Emphasizing the government's "attention" to its religious workers, he reported that the Khotan Government has distributed 6.56 million RMB (USD 820 thousand) to 4,180 religious personnel since 2005. "Political positions" have been given to 435 religious leaders, including one National People's Congress (NPC) deputy and one Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) deputy, four China Islamic Association members and various local people's congress deputies.

¶16. (C) Lei Xianling, Deputy Director of the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Commission of the central Xinjiang Bayingolin Mongolian Autonomous Prefecture, which has small Buddhist and Christian populations, remarked that religious affairs management is a "service" provided to the religious community. He reported that 61 percent of the prefecture's religious personnel receive a government stipend. All religious workers serving on a government body receive a salary of 150-1,500 RMB (USD 19-190) per month. The Bayingolin prefecture government has helped train 78 religious personnel between 2001 and 2005 and the 2005-2008 sessions will include 84 people, Lei noted. He highlighted that the local government sent a young Buddhist monk who was identified as a reincarnate Buddha to train at the Labrang Monastery in Gansu Province.

Training the "Next Generation"

¶17. (C) In order to cultivate Khotan's next generation of religious leaders, 220 religious leaders are in the process of training 841 "talibs" who range in age from 18 to 25. About one-fourth of these students have already been assigned religious leadership positions, Metnaz noted. Khotan Ethnic and Religious Affairs

Commission Party Secretary He Chengang explained that in order to qualify as a teacher, the imam or khatib must be approved by the local Islamic Association. The teacher must also be "politically healthy," meaning that he is patriotic, does not possess any terrorist or extremist views and is educated, He remarked.

¶ 18. (C) A teacher generally does not accept more than three students in order to avoid being "overburdened." An apprenticeship usually lasts three years, which is sufficient to prepare students for the qualifying exam. The Khotan Islamic Association has sent 21 "advanced" religious students on three-month courses at the Islamic Theological Seminary in Urumqi and 42 others to study on five-year programs in Urumqi or the China Islamic Theological Seminary in Beijing. A few Islamic students, including the current imam at the main Jama'i Mosque in Khotan, have studied at Al-Azhar in Cairo through a regular program organized by the China Islamic Association.

¶ 19. (C) Questioned about restrictions on religious activities for those under 18, Party Secretary He argued that minors under the age of 18 do not understand the nature of religion and must first focus on the study of science and culture. Parents are responsible for their child's education and must ensure their child receives a standard education in accordance with Chinese law. In conversations with Poloffs, many local Muslims confirmed the prohibition on minors participating in any form of religious activity, including prayer attendance, while noting that religious education still frequently occurs within the home. Highlighting the sensitivity of the issue, officials from Kashgar Prefecture's Yarkand County stopped a local UK Save the Children (SC) child protection program once officials realized that the UN Covenant on the Rights of the Child (CRC) distributed by SC contained a clause protecting a child's right to religion, according to Urumqi-based SC Xinjiang Program Manager Mark Jenkins (protect).

Foreign Muslims Have Limited Influence

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¶ 10. (C) Asked if Khotan receives any financial assistance from the outside Muslim world, He Chengang remarked that according to the 2005 religious affairs regulations, foreigners are theoretically permitted to invest in local communities experiencing economic hardships. The government, however, has seen no such applications, he said. Regarding factionalism in the Uighur community, Deputy Director Ma observed that religious factionalism among Uighurs is much less common than among the Hui (Ref B). The only non-Sufi mosque in Khotan belongs to a small ethnic Tajik community, which subscribes to Shi'a Islam, Khotan's Metnaz noted. In separate conversations with Poloffs, most Uighurs identified themselves simply as Sufi Muslims and played down factionalism within the Uighur community. Outside a large mosque in Korla, capital of Bayingolin Prefecture, an elderly Uighur quietly acknowledged, nonetheless, that 30 percent of the Uighur population is Wahhabi, while adding that the government does not recognize this group.

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